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# POST-16

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# Community Wealth Building?

in all sectors of post compulsory education

# POST-16 EDUCATOR

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## Articles, photos etc wanted:

The editors welcome articles by and/or for practitioners and intending practitioners in any area of post-16 education, especially by women, plus letters, news items, materials and illustrations. Articles can be published without the author's name if desired. **The deadline for the next (April) issue is 20th March for articles and 30th April for solidarity material about disputes etc.**

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**Articles etc do not necessarily reflect the views of the editorial board**

# BTECs' future still in the balance

## Martin Allen assesses the situation as the Skills Bill progresses through parliament

Widespread opposition to government plans to defund BTEC qualifications, ostensibly to make way for the new T-levels, led to the forming of a multi-organisational *ProtectStudentChoicealliance*, its representation stretching from teacher unions to the Association of Colleges. With the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill scheduled to pass through parliament, 118 cross-party MPs and peers supporting the campaign signed a letter to the new Secretary of State, Nadhim Zahawi.

In parliament, some of the most vocal opposition to the changes has come from members of the House of Lords - in particular former Secretaries of State for Education, Ken Baker, the instigator of the National Curriculum under Mrs Thatcher but now a campaigner for improved technical education, and David Blunkett, responsible for overseeing many of New Labour's education reforms. Also, David Willetts, who served as universities minister under David Cameron. Blunkett and Baker (*Guardian* October 13th) have also complained that the defunding proposals were hidden as 'secondary legislation' within the wider Bill, therefore making the funding changes difficult to debate.

But the Government rolled back their lordships' attempts to amend the Bill and secure the status of BTECs and other Level 3 technical/vocational qualifications, the contents of which are considered to overlap with the T-levels. At the Commons committee stage (before the legislation went for its final reading) Labour MPs cited the role that BTECs had played in providing alternative opportunities for entering higher education, but Tory members toed the government line.

Rather than accepting the Lords' fallback proposals to delay the funding cull for up to four years while T-levels were properly bedded in, Zahawi made a Commons statement explaining that the timetable for the introduction of the various T-levels would be extended by a year, by implication maintaining BTECs' current funding till the end of 2024. But Zahawi also commented that 'It is quite likely we will see many BTECs and other similar applied general-style qualifications continuing to play an important

role in 16-19 education, for the foreseeable future'. Only time will tell what he means by this. (It should be remembered that, in response to harsh criticism received during the 'consultation' stage, the Government at least promised to keep the decommissioning of technical qualifications 'under review'.)

The future of the T-levels is certainly not assured. The first set of results are not due until next summer, but even these will be for no more than a pilot group of students in just three areas, from a limited number of institutions. With the slow roll-out of the Ts (only seven of the 21 routes will now have started by the 2022/3 academic year), it will need several cohorts to assess the new qualification's viability, but also, and most importantly, its credibility with young people.

Immediate concerns about their implementation can be identified. Firstly, the Ts have been primarily designed to be delivered through FE colleges - originally through new 'specialist' institutions. This requirement has since been dropped, but of the initial two hundred providers listed by the Department for Education FE colleges make up 75 per cent, alongside a handful of sixth form colleges, schools and (the failed) University Technology Colleges. Most schools (where approaching 40 per cent of year 11s will continue their post-16 education, including thousands who will enrol on BTECs), despite the significant additional funding available, do not have the infrastructure to deliver more than one or two, particularly in areas like construction. Neither do they have the links with local employers to secure the 45 days of work placement that is required. Changes in labour market recruitment and training practices mean that increasingly colleges now find this difficult.

Of more general concern is the nature of the qualifications themselves. Like the vocational and technical qualifications they are designed to replace, the Ts have as much (maybe more) in common with academic A-levels as they do with the work-based apprenticeships. Students undertake 1200 hours of 'guided learning' (compared with a minimum 315

hours work placement), primarily in classrooms, take written examinations, and complete externally assessed projects. One of the criticisms made by Baker and Blunkett is that the T-levels are not work-based enough.

As significant, T-level entrance requirements are comparatively high - requiring five GCSE passes, including in English and maths. In other words, to enrol on a T-level a young person needs to have been relatively successful at Key Stage 4. In which case, in a period when gaining qualifications is so much about collecting 'currency', why are they likely to switch from the high status academic route to an unproven alternative? Key here will be the attitude of elite universities. Most, if not all, will want to 'recognise' the qualification, but this does not mean that students with T-levels will be admitted. In this respect, a major advantage of a BTEC is that it can be taken as a one, two or three unit qualification, each of which is equivalent to and can be studied alongside an A-level. Once again it will take more than one cohort of young people with a T-level (as their only qualification) to assess its standing.

While up to 30 per cent of school and college leavers applying to university have a BTEC award, in many cases this is in combination with at least an A-level. The learning and timetabling demands of a T-level mean that combinations of this sort are not possible. Arguably this is the result of a political decision to create a binary system of learning consistent with the more general direction of the 2021 Skills White Paper, which is now being enshrined in the Bill. In an interview with Schools Week (13th December), Ofqual boss Jo Saxton called for a 'much more mixed offering' for post-16 qualifications. (The Skills Bill confirms the position of the Institute of Apprenticeships as the sole authority responsible for both the implementation and the oversight of T-levels, with no role for Ofqual.)

Campaigns in defence of the BTEC qualification will continue. It is essential that these include those who are not necessarily against T-levels but are opposed to them serving as the only alternative to academic study. However, we also need to be aware of the greater inequities of the Bill. A Lords sub-committee has taken up the cause of those young people not following the academic route, arguing that the Bill does little to increase opportunities for the young unemployed. In addition to emphasising how student choice will be narrowed, Labour movement campaigners have highlighted how Tory proposals for post-16 learning will increase employer influence within Further Education and lead to greater privatisation and 'businessification' within the

sector. But in the context of a changing labour market and an increasingly polarised occupational structure, and with technological change destroying many 'middle jobs', there is also a need to reassess the role of technical/vocational qualifications and their potential benefit to young people.



# To have or have not: the North's growing education class divide

Stephen Lambert

Working-class kids have become the North's under-achievers at school. That's why the region's schools and colleges need more investment to give all young people a chance.

As the Huddersfield University educationalist Ron Thompson points out, it's social class or socio-economic status and not ethnicity or gender that determines how well a child does at school. The more affluent the family, measured by wealth or occupation, the more successful a youngster will be and the greater the educational 'life-chances'.

The defining mission of a responsible government must be to eliminate these disparities and ensure that every young person in the North has the opportunity to fulfil his/her potential, regardless of household background.

The Children's Commission 2018 report *Growing Up North* is one of the latest to observe that working-class kids or those from poorer neighbourhoods achieve weaker exam results than those of their peers from more well-to-do families. According to research carried out by the Convention of the North, qualification levels are

lower in our region than in England as a whole. Over a quarter of the population have no vocational or academic qualifications. Less than a quarter possess a level 4 technical qualification.

The most disadvantaged pupils across England have fallen further behind than their peers. They are on average over two-thirds behind non-disadvantaged students by the age of 16. The worst hit areas in the North East are Cumbria, Tyneside and South-East Northumberland. As the sociologist Diane Reay notes: 'There remains an entrenched and unbroken correlation between class and educational success'.

For the authors of *Growing Up North*, the chief factors for white and BAME working-class achievement are poverty and material circumstances. In the Newcastle Central parliamentary constituency, over 38 per cent of youngsters experience child poverty, which has clearly had an impact on their educational success or failure. More recent work produced by the NE Child Poverty Commission reveals that child poverty has increased both in the north and Midlands. Middlesbrough has a child poverty

rate of 41 per cent, with a North East regional rate of almost a quarter (24 per cent).

There's an attainment gap between pupils who receive free school meals (FSM) and those that don't. 15 per cent of boys getting FSMs do not achieve five 'good' GCSEs. Problems at home, such as low incomes and dysfunctional parenting, are more to blame than schools for poor exam results. As Reay writes: 'We need to look beyond the school gates. There's only so much that educational institutions can do to improve class inequalities, given the social and economic context in which they operate'.

The stark reality is that too many disadvantaged youngsters living in inner-city wards and the outer-council estates are trapped in overcrowded housing conditions where there's little space to do homework. Many lack personal computers or laptops - termed 'digital exclusion' - a situation compounded by the COVID-19 lockdowns.

The political scientist Matthew Goodwin puts it down to 'cultural factors'. In many workless households there's a lack of

strong parental interest, partly reflecting parents' own 'bad' experiences of formal schooling, with an ingrained anti-learning culture. Although this is breaking down amongst stable working-class communities, it's not doing so in the 'forgotten' de-industrialised places in County Durham, Teesside and West Cumbria. In contrast, as Simmons and Smythe note, middle-class professional parents possess the economic and 'social and cultural capital' to get their offspring into the best Russell Group universities and well-paid jobs.

Some scholars, such as Stephen Pollard and Lord Adonis, put the class attainment gap down to the quality of schooling. Of course, many schools and post-16 colleges in the region are doing their best, in challenging circumstances, with able and dedicated teachers with an emphasis on inclusive learning. But a fifth of students in the region are in secondary schools rated less than 'good' by Ofsted. Three of the region's FE colleges have been rated as 'in need of improvement'.

The Government's free-market policy measures, such as Free Schools and Academies, have had little effect. Even former Ofsted boss Sir Michael Wilshaw conceded that academisation had failed to transform the 'miserable standards' being achieved in the North. Good schooling can't eradicate inequality, but it can help to mitigate it. There's some evidence to support Lord Blunkett's view that an 'outstanding or good school' in a deprived neighbourhood can make a qualitative difference to the life expectations of its learners.

Teachers who are well prepared for lessons, who have high expectations and set high

standards of pupil behaviour, who place emphasis on praise rather than blame, who treat young people with respect, and who show a genuine interest in their development are important. But, above all, there's an expectation set by competent, high-striving school heads or college principals, who are signed up to a strong achieving ethos which promotes self-confidence and self-esteem amongst all learners.

To date there's been some constructive response from central government. The south of the Tyne has been designated as an 'Opportunity Area' with a budget of £24m. This money is being spent on providing early career training for teachers, targeted support to 'struggling schools', and work to improve the transition from primary to secondary education. If we're serious about closing the class divide in education national

government must adopt public policies to bring about a more equal region - in short, making the ideas of 'levelling up' and a 'Northern Powerhouse' a tangible reality.

The establishment of a 'Learning Challenge' in the North of Tyne Combined Authority, based on the successful London model, remains a priority, together with an assault on home- and neighbourhood-based inequalities.

Contrary to popular convention, the distinctions of class haven't vanished. It's these that affect how well children and young adults do at school or college, and the future laid out before them.

## **bell hooks**

**The editors of *PSE* hope to include in the next (April) issue a tribute to bell hooks (Gloria Watkins), author of the ground-breaking 1982 book *Ain't I a Woman. Black Women and Feminism* and of later writings including *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), who died shortly before Christmas 2021.**

**Readers interested in contributing to this feature are invited to contact the editors via [post16educator@runbox.com](mailto:post16educator@runbox.com).**

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# Future workers, 'levelling up' and a 'skills revolution'?

**Hannah Walters explains how current conversations around vocational education don't tell the whole story.**

Over the last decade or so, vocational education has been under the microscope. Notably, the 2011 Wolf Report, which reviewed vocational education provision in England, generated scores of headlines on its publication for its claims that, as the BBC put it at the time, 'hundreds of thousands of young people are doing vocational courses which do not lead to university or a job'. Wolf was especially critical of the lack of labour market value attached to many courses, along with failures to promote core skills and qualifications in English and maths (an issue tackled in the report's Recommendation 9). Alive and well for the last ten years, these debates continue today. The current government is quick to generate and propagate buzzwords and catchy phrases like 'skills revolution' and 'levelling up', with vocational education finding itself at the centre of many of these conversations.

But while the so-called 'real world value' will always be an important part of the puzzle when it comes to evaluating education, the reduction of vocational education to its simplest economic or skills-based parts serves to gloss over the very things which make it unique. At its best, so much of the vocational educational experience is rooted not only in the formal accrual of skills, but in its less tangible aspects; it provides informal support for young people, especially working-class young people; it encourages engagement with interests which lie beyond standard school curricula; it fosters dynamic and practical learning environments; and it allows for a degree of choice and autonomy for young people who have spent most of their educational lives subject to strict rules and overlapping modes of social control. While I am not suggesting vocational education is either perfect or uniform in its delivery of these benefits - and there remain many issues to be tackled across the sector - these are some of the characteristics of vocational education I witnessed during my research with working-class young women and girls on beauty courses, the results of which led me to conclude that judging

vocational education purely by its ability to produce future workers does not tell the whole story.

The ideas at the crux of these 'levelling up' and 'skills revolution' conversations are nothing new. They belong to a long history of understanding young people as little more than the sum of their latent potentials. Today, young people are overwhelmingly constructed in terms of their future lives. Will they turn out to be successful, productive and securely employed members of society? Will they accrue a sufficiently valuable skillset to avoid becoming a drain on the state or a worrying NEET statistic? Will their education prepare them for a late capitalist world in economic and environmental flux? Will this accrual of education and skills mean they might one day be able to help solve big issues we as a society are facing in the future? Though common to debates around young people and education in general, these questions and associated anxieties are especially sharp when it comes to vocational education, as it exists as a mode of education closely associated with the skills base (and skills shortages) of the nation and its future. Given its working-class status (especially when compared to university), these questions speak to broader anxieties around working-class young people. So often pathologised as lazy, antisocial and/or irresponsible, the accrual of useful, industry-facing skills soothes some of these concerns; a neoliberal logic which suggests hard work and self-development are key to solving an array of society's woes.

When I first began my own research into vocational education, I shared some similar concerns. I expected to 'uncover' the ways in which class- and gender-based disadvantages and oppressions were reproduced via the beauty courses I observed, an ongoing and intergenerational violence sanctioned by the state and executed through formal educational pathways. Aspects of this remain true: the vast majority of beauty students are women and girls, beauty education is undervalued, and beauty practitioners are underpaid.

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But from spending time in vocational learning spaces, I found beauty education to be so much more than these narratives suggest: a space of solidarity, support, creativity and joy. Some of the participants who took part in my study described their time on beauty courses in terms of 'warmth', 'friendship', and even 'love'. It was a space where being a working-class girl was allowed. Indeed, the identities and cultural products of these overlapping gender and class positions were celebrated, rather than tightly controlled in schools or mocked and ridiculed as is so often the case in our wider culture (including by the Prime Minister).

The staff who worked in the colleges where I conducted my research were central to what made beauty learning spaces valuable for the working-class girls who studied there, and they frequently worked far beyond the remit of their official roles or the curriculum. They talked to students about their home lives and personal issues, providing support and direction in navigating difficult times. I heard reports of students with precarious home lives getting their clothes washed by the staff on a Monday morning following a weekend of sleeping on friends' couches. Students would come to college having not eaten. Some would have had no electricity for a few days as the meter ran out. Others were simply negotiating the peaks and troughs of life, and would seek and receive support and advice from beauty lecturers on everything from boyfriend trouble to financial difficulties. This kind of pastoral support happens throughout our education systems (and is often overlooked or under-appreciated) but the demographics of the beauty learning space mean challenges arising for this cohort are likely to be more acute, and occur in higher numbers.

Alongside this important pastoral work, I also observed students being encouraged to be imaginative and enjoy the learning experience. Their artistic instincts were nurtured, and students were supported to take pride in their work and abilities. Classrooms and practice salons were fun, dynamic and creative; pop music would often be playing on the college's classroom computer speakers, and conversations around culture, politics and personal lives would intermingle with discussions of nail art and epidermis anatomy. Staff emphasised the importance of mutual respect and empathy over punishment and control in how they dealt with challenges arising in the classroom. This dramatically contrasts with the approach of the current chair of the Government's Social Mobility Commission, Katharine Birbalsingh, who promotes strict rules and discipline as key to educational success. (I recently wrote a blog about this, which you can read at my Mapping Girlhood Blog.) It's important to note that all this takes place in a vocational and further education landscape of chronic underfunding. As the Institute of Fiscal Studies noted in their 2019 report, funding for further education has fallen in real terms over the last decade, and there

exists 'a historical pattern where further education and sixth forms receive relatively low spending increases when overall spending goes up, and some of the largest cuts when spending goes down' (p64).

In a nutshell, what I found in my research was that vocational education can provide an array of benefits to working-class students which go beyond the economic and future-worker narratives we see elsewhere. It doesn't just provide what Paulo Freire and bell hooks refer to as the 'banking system of education' - whereby students are seen as passive consumers of information, memorising and regurgitating it as a means to succeed; it's so much more than this. This is an interesting finding in itself, and one that unpicks some of the broad-brush criticisms often levelled at vocational education. But in my work, what really stood out about vocational education was how different it was from school. While there were some exceptions, the overwhelming view of participants was that school represented a negative experience. Many said they 'hated' school, constructing beauty education not as a specific aspiration in itself, but rather as simply a way to escape; leaving school was the goal, and beauty education was a means of achieving it. One participant, whose lyrical way of expressing herself eventually became the title of my PhD thesis, described entering beauty education as being able to 'breathe, finally'.

For me, it's stories like these that are missing from the way we talk about vocational education, and the cold instrumentalism of judging vocational education purely by the rigid criteria of economics and skill accrual speaks to a narrowing of education and its purpose to little more than securing paid employment at the end of the road; standards more likely to be levelled at working-class young people's education than at their middle-class peers. In turn, this underscores pernicious narratives surrounding working-class young people which construct them as potential problems to be solved, and prevent us from understanding beauty education - and vocational education more broadly - as an intrinsically meaningful and valuable mode of post-16 education. This is not to say that the economic and employability value of vocational courses is not relevant - it's important to keep these in mind, and reconcile them with how vocational education is organised, funded, promoted, marketed and taught (as well as the values we as a society place upon these kinds of jobs and careers). Rather, what I'm arguing is that by solely focusing on these aspects, we fail to understand vocational education for what it truly is, in its own terms, and through a lens which recognises the vast complexity of contemporary young people's educational lives.

